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ABSTRACT

The use of student writing journals in the college classroom is the focus of a conversation between two writing instructors at Brigham Young University in Hawaii. Brigham Young-Hawaii has a student body that represents more than 50 different nations, with foreign students at about 40%. Both instructors teach classes with high percentages of foreign students. Because of the lack of emphasis on the human element of the learning process in Freshman English class, classes are sometimes dominated by a few native speakers, and many foreign students feel unnecessarily pressured. Some foreign students come from cultures that do not encourage active participation in class, but writing journals can help students explore their thoughts and feelings in a low risk format and promote more active modes of learning. Students are able to ask questions, express feelings, criticize, and make meaning in a medium that is relatively safe. Students are asked to write a minimum of 3 times a week; to write about reading assignments, class activities, class discussions, or sometimes about specific issues. The journals are collected 4 times a semester, and the instructors write comments or ask questions. The journals are not graded, but points are given for the number of entries. The voices of the foreign students show through in excerpts from some representative journals. Their thoughts about their experiences in peer editing groups reveal the cultural differences that are sometimes not apparent in the day-to-day classroom situation. (Contains 10 references.) (NKA)

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Do You Hear What I Hear?: Chinese and American Writing Instructors Compare Journal Voices from International Writers

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

WILSON: Paul Desruisseaux reports that according to a study done by the Institute of International Education, foreign students accounted for 3.1% of the total student enrollment in US higher education institutions in 1995. Forty-eight percent of these students, which totaled over 450,000[1], were registered as undergraduates. Most of these foreign students came from Asia, with the largest numbers coming from Japan, the Republic of South Korea, and Thailand (A64-68). If you are from California, New York, Texas, Massachusetts, or Hawaii, chances are you have experienced or are currently experiencing the joys and challenges of having international students in your classrooms.

The student body at Brigham Young University-Hawaii, where we teach, represents more than 50 different nations from around the world. Foreign students at this institution make up 40% of the total enrollment.

SANOMA: These foreign students come with different cultural backgrounds, goals, values, and orientations towards learning. They enrich the classroom experience with their personal stories and different perspectives. Despite these benefits, instructors who have had experience with international students know the challenges of teaching a multicultural class. In her work with English as a Second Language (ESL) students, Emanuela Morini sums up one the greatest challenges

[1] 453,787 to be exact

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faced by non-native English speakers. She claims that the usual atmosphere of the second language classroom fails to enhance "authentic social interaction" because the language is treated more as an "object of learning" rather than as a "tool of communication" (19). We believe that this applies even more to the writing classroom where the major focus of the class is the arrangement of words on a sheet of paper. Because of the lack of emphasis on the human element of the learning process in the freshman English writing class, many foreign students feel unnecessarily pressured and they quietly suffocate as the class verbally steamrolls over them.

The struggles of international learners in these classrooms are intensified when they see their classmates participating openly and freely in discussions while they themselves remain silent. It is not unusual to see foreign students remain passive throughout the semester. It is also not unusual to see the classroom discussion being dominated by a few students (generally native English speakers) who either do so because they love the material and love to discuss, or who feel uncomfortable with silence in the classroom and talk to break the uneasiness of the situation. In fact, as we were tabulating the compositions of our respective classes, we were surprised to actually "see" that we each had only 6 mainland American students in our classes. We both had presumed that we had more. After some discussion, we concluded that this perception was because these few students were the ones who spoke up and led classroom discussions throughout the semester. Although the international students sat right before our eyes in class, we had

"discounted" their presence simply because they were not as vocal as some of their other classmates despite being the clear majority in terms of numbers

WILSON: Through our experience with the foreign students in our respective classes, we have come to believe that it is not so much the loss of a voice that these foreign students are having the most trouble with, but rather with keeping up with the expectations of a learning environment that emphasizes active and vocal participation. In reality, these students come from cultures that do not encourage active participation in class. Yet now their personality, comprehension, and even intelligence are being judged by how vocal they are in a 50 minute class. One excellent way which we have found to address this issue is through the use of student journals.

A WORD ABOUT STUDENT JOURNALS

Writing journals, according to Fulwiler, Haviland, and Whitehill respectively, have been used to "help students explore their thoughts and feelings in a low risk format and to promote more active modes of learning" (qtd. in Capossela 248). They have been used to increase interaction, encourage critical thinking, reduce writing anxiety, etc., because, as Nancy B. Cothern puts it, they allow for the "gathering and organizing of thoughts" (6). Students are able to ask questions, express feelings, criticize, and make meaning in a medium that is relatively safe. They do not have to fear possible embarrassment or retaliation from classmates nor do they have to worry about whether or not their comments will jeopardize their

grades. Because of these desirable effects, we add our support to the use of student journals in the writing classroom.

ORGANIZATION OF PRESENTATION

We will give a brief description of our methodology with regards to using student journals in our classes. Because of time limitations, we will only share some of the more interesting and poignant voices we derived from some of our students' journal entries. Finally, we will propose some areas for further study or development with regards to the use of student journals in the multinational classroom.

What we would like to do today is to share with you how we have utilized this "virtually limitless instructional tool" (to borrow Cothern's words), to provide international students a medium to participate in a vocal arena where they are clearly non-dominant. These journals allow us to get a glimpse of our students' lives which we may not readily perceive in regular classroom activity. Through these journals and through regular individual conferencing, we feel that we have at least provided our students with some "authentic social interaction" in their brief stint with us in the classroom.

METHODOLOGY

SANOMA: Wilson teaches 24 students and I have 26. Of the 24 students in Wilson's class, there are 8 native Hawaiians, 1 Indonesian, 2 Tahitians, 1 Chinese, 1 South Korean, 1 Japanese, 2 Tongans, 1 Fijian, 1 student from Hong Kong, and 6 from mainland USA. In my class there are 5 South Koreans, 7 Japanese, 4 Tongans,

1 Hawaiian Japanese, 1 Thai, 1 East Indian (Trinidad), and 7 from mainland USA[2]. Students in our classes are asked to write a minimum of three times a week; to write about reading assignments, class activities, or class discussions. Sometimes we give students specific issues to write on. We collect these journals about four times a semester and write comments in the margins or ask questions. Wilson's responses are sometimes a page long; mine are seldom more than four or five lines long. We do not grade the journals for grammar; for content; or for length, although we do give points for the number of entries.

What continues to amaze and delight us is the journal entries from, as Wilson says, the "silent" students. The voices of these students are sometimes frustrated or critical; sometimes they express gratitude for the help of other students and sometime they express fear of the need to share their writing with their peers; sometimes the voices make suggestions about running the class or writing assignments, and sometimes we hear sophisticated critical analysis. The following unedited entries are some examples of these voices:

JOURNAL ENTRIES & COMMENT

SANOMA: ***EUNYOUNG***, a young Korean woman who never speaks in class, writes about confronting a person from another culture on a personal level. Her roommate, a woman from Tonga kept using Eunyoung's belongings without

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[2] Wilson's class: approximately 41.7% international students, 58.3% mainland USA plus Hawaiian students. Ethnic mix--Asian National: 21%; Polynesian: 54%; Caucasian: 25%
Sanoma's class: approximately 69.2% international students, 30.8% mainland USA plus Hawaiian students. Ethnic mix--Asian National: 53.8%; Polynesian: 19.2%; Caucasian: 27%

asking. After several weeks of finding her textbooks, pens, and even clothes on her roommate's desk, Eunyoung finally confronted her. She writes:

> I was mad. I told her that if she needs something of mine, just notice me before using them.
>
> She was embarrassed, and she said that she didn't do such things on a purpose. In her culture, everyone if they are close, shares everything without a consent. She kept saying sorry to me. I understood why she had done like that. Even though she attended not to do the same thing after the day, she often forgot what I said. I couldn't get mad at all because I knew it was a part of her culture, and it means I was her close friend.

WILSON: ***SHEN*** is a young Chinese man majoring in Business. He is very soft spoken and quiet in class. After attending a speech competition which had the theme of "Patriotism," Shen records his frustration with the ignorance of the individual who won the contest.

> Everyone has his homeland, and everyone should love his homeland. In the speech contest with the subject of patriotism recently held in BYUH, all participants expressed their deep love to their countries. The champion of the contest. . .won the hearts of judges and audience with her well-organized speech, relaxed manner and high speech skills. However, I feel deeply regretted to part of her speech, in which she fabricated something out of nothing.

In her speech, she told the story of her great grandfather and how he immigrated from China to Hawaii. Expressing her gratitude to him, she noted what her life might have been like if she had grown up in mainland China. She said, "I would have been a concubine, or a slave." It is a very strong contrast used in her speech; however, it is an absolutely wrong statement inconsistent with the facts.

The phenomenon of concubines had disappeared for more than forty years in China. Due to the deep influence of feudalism, some high-ranked officials and rich businessmen had one or more concubines before the founding of the PRC in 1949. Since then, such behavior has been prohibited by laws and anyone who is against the laws will receive punishment. As a student who was born after 1949, how could she have been a concubine?

SANOMA: ***YAYOI*** is a very shy, quiet young woman from Japan who never speaks in class and has her friends ask me questions for her. She is even uncomfortable coming to my office to talk. Yayoi writes about the differences she sees between American and Japanese students:

The good thing of Americans is that they are good at finding their talents, but not their faults. On the other hand, Japanese are good at finding their faults, but not their talents. I wish I can be good at finding both my faults and talents. I think I'm still discovering myself such as my characteristics, my talents, and so on.

One worry for many of the students is having to read their essays to other students. Journal entries from two of Wilson's students and three of mine highlight the stress that this sort of activity can cause.

WILSON: ***CECILIA*** is a recently married young woman from Hong Kong. She sits right at the very back of class and is very nervous when asked to speak. She is very polite and apologetic in her conversations. She recorded her experience in the peer group evaluation. She writes:

> The draft of the second out-class essay was due today. It was because Adam was not in class, Kile [Kyle] and I just exchanged our writing for each other. His essay talked about how to drive a car and it was easy to understand. Yet, my English was very poor, I was not sure whether his grammar right or not. In fact, I was not able to give him any help. Today's lesson was a little bit boring. It was because I just spend ten minutes for me to go through his essay. However, he spent more than twenty minutes to correct mine. Kile would feel trouble to see my essay and did not want to be my partner anymore. Kile, you were so poor! On the other hand, Kile just correct my grammar, he had not given me any suggestion on the writing style, content or ideas I needed to take care of.

KYLE, Cecilia's mainland American partner in her group, writes:

> The other day in English class we got into our assigned groups and revised our . . . papers. Me and this Chinese girl are the only ones

> in the group. She edits mine and I edit hers. The thing is, she doesn't really edit my essays at all. She reads it through and tells me it's easy to understand. That's great that it's clear even to an international student, but there's no revision done at all by her. I guess it's okay since I love to edit papers. I just feel bad when I cross out just about a word every sentence and she doesn't even touch mine. Oh well, I'll live.

What is amazing here is that Kyle and Cecilia never shared these thoughts with each other. After reading their journal entries, I was able to mediate between them in order to help them have a more enriching time in their peer editing group.

SANOMA: The journal entries of ***MASA*** and ***JUNKO,*** two students from Japan, give evidence of problems that may exist in the classroom of which the teacher is unaware simply because everyone behaves very politely. Masa writes about his discomfort in the peer editing group he has been assigned to:

> The American boy is the problem. Whenever he talks to others, he has never looked at me and another Japanese student. Never. It's really obvious. Also, students usually don't get too strict feedback for other students because they don't want others to feel bad. But he is not. Whenever he give me his feedback, he always mentions bad thing but he doesn't do that to other students in our group. He seems that I'm stupid because I'm not a native speaker. He might hate Oriental. I don't care about sharing my essay to the others but I don't want to be a

member of the group because I always feel bad after. Discrimination is existed on this campus even though we are Mormons. I'm really shocked about it.

Two weeks later Masa writes about another experience in the same editing group:

Today was worse than usual because one of my Japanese friends, Junko, was absent and I was only person that English was my second language. All the other people in my group spoke English very frequently so that I was frustrated. On the other hand, other groups had a diversity and they seemed that they really enjoyed sharing their essays. Actually, I felt that I wanted to change the group.

Junko, the Japanese woman in this same group, wrote the following about the situation:

We shared our essays with each other by dividing into some small groups in class. It made me so stress somehow because I totally (didn't) don't have confidence about my English. However, I was surprised that I didn't feel much nervousness than last time today. Maybe I get used to sharing my essays with someone (?!) or because of the same people were in my group (?!). I think both of them are right answers to me. Why I am writing about this morning is one of my group members mentioned about discrimination. He said that he didn't like our group because someone always ignored and gave

> negative opinions about his essay. It seemed like to be discriminated for him. I thought (this is my opinion) the person (who is negative English Speaker) is caring (considered) about Asian people that we were too shy to talk. He might believe that it was much better for us not to talk a lot. (I hope you understand what I want to say! It's complicated to describe in language or words.) Anyway, it is always big challenge for all international students to attend the class with negative English speakers. However, we can handle it because a lot of people could do in the past. Challenge is not easy to overcome, but if it's bigger, the joy after we overcome it will be much greater, isn't it?

CAM, the American man who Masa perceives as negative, wrote this about the first sharing experience:

> Sharing my essay was so easy. All I had to do was read it and it was all over. Nothing to it. Simple, painless, and even fun listening to other's stories. Afterwards they shared a few things with me on how I can improve. Nothing lost; all gained!

The American student obviously had no idea that he was causing Masa discomfort. When I talked with Cam and Masa individually, I discovered they were roommates. I asked them if they would be willing to meet with each other in my office; both said they would come. Masa did not keep the appointment. Later he told me, "There is no problem. Sometimes I not come to class. Too tired."

However, he was always "too tired" on the days we did peer editing workshops. days.

WILSON: ***PATRICIA***, a shy Tahitian girl who, like Cecilia, always sits at the back and never says a word writes the following about peer editing in her journal:

> About the work in groups. This idea and its application is helpful because I can share with other people my ideas or my feelings. However, sometimes, no most of the time, I feel ridiculous when other students read and correct my essay. I think that an essay is something very personal that I have to share only with the teacher. I don't feel the necessity to share my papers with others than the teacher . . . When I work in groups, I feel very incomfortable because I don't want the other members of the group to make fun of me or of my ideas . . . How can I correct a native speaker's paper even though I've just got out of EIL classes . . . One of the guy in my group seems to be very smart and sure of him so it is one more reason for me to be very incomfortable in his presence.

Our international students often attend lab classes at the Reading and Writing Center for extra help with their writing. Sometimes the tutors are a source of frustration for the students. ***CECILIA*** records her feelings in these words:

> I felt frustrated on those tutors who worked in reading and writing center. This was because I found there had many errors on my last out of class essay which I got from my teacher. I remember that I

had met two different appointments at RWC that meant that two tutors had already gone through my essay. The first tutor was very bad, he spend my tutoring time to solve other problems . . . and then started to read my essay. He just read the first two paragraphs and then the time was almost over so that he asked to make another appointment. I thought that this tutor was not responsible to his students and he also wasted their time. The another one helped me to go through the whole essay, but it still had many mistakes. From the above experience, I did not have confidence in the tutors.

SANOMA: ***MASA*** also went to the RWC, but he didn't blame the tutors for his low grade. He said:

> By the way, I got first out of class essay's score but it was really bad. Even though I went to the R/W Center and I worked hard, I got a C-. I understood that I had some easy grammar mistakes but I had some mistakes that I didn't think they were wrong. It seemed that all of my EIL teachers were wrong and stupid. I followed their instructions for writing but was it wrong? I don't understand why I got a really, really bad score.

Throughout the semester, most of these students did not volunteer any comment in class unless specifically asked questions, but their journal entries reveal that more goes on with these "silent" ones than meets the eye.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

WILSON:

There are still many areas of interest with regards to the use of student journals. Some questions that we have which we feel would contribute to a greater understanding of our students and the dynamics in our classrooms are:

* What are the entries of students who dominate classroom discussion like?
* What is the relationship between age, gender, and nationality with content of the entries?
* Does the age, ethnicity and qualification of the instructor affect the content of students' journal entries in any way?
* What is the progress in language learning of international students who take the journal assignment seriously as compared to those who don't?

CONCLUSION

We believe that using student journals as a means to provide international students (and any non-vocal student as well) with a voice in the classroom is a valuable and worthwhile activity in the learning experience. Rather than treat our students as grammar spouting machines, as we unfortunately sometimes do, we hope that we have addressed in a small way, the human part of our students through the use of journals.

Reading student journals and addressing student concerns that arise from journal entries take up an unimaginable portion of our time. We do sometimes ask ourselves whether or not the extra effort put into assigning and reading student

journals is worth it. However, like Louisa Enright (292) who asked the same question and then answered herself, our answer is an undeniable yes.

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